

Schlesinger: 'Not Without

Books

THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE: IDEAS, POWER & VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

Haughton, Mifflin, 313 pp. \$5.95

Reviewed by Geoffrey Wolff

By its title you may judge how far this work rambles from issue to issue. While it aspires to the capacious vision of a book like Tocqueville's, it is in fact flawed by the disunities of its origins in a great many

occasional pieces—essays and journalism and book reviews.

Arthur Schlesinger explains that all the pieces that make up *The Crisis of Confidence* were revised for hard-cover republication,

but the book, nonetheless suffers from grave lapses of editorial attention: undue repetition on the one hand, and a condensation born of journalistic requirements on the other.

However, as one might expect, Schlesinger's opinions are not without force and elegance. If his declarations sometimes have the condescending manner of lectures from a patient, but weary, professor to unruly Hottentots, they are good lectures for all that. If he often tells us what we think we already know too well, it is equally true that what we think we know about America is often in tension with our experience of it. This

book attempts to relax these tensions by naming them, and explaining their sources in our past.

It begins with a consideration of the violence that has savaged our leaders and institutions since 1963. Schlesinger summarizes his view of the phenomenon with the apocalyptic sentiment he employed in the immediate aftermath of the murder last spring of Robert Kennedy:

"We can hardly doubt that in the eyes of much of mankind we have become a frightening people—because in this decade we have permitted murder to become a major technique of domestic politics."

The author concedes that the particular murders he writes of were the acts of madmen, but insists that there is something special about America that makes its insane behave murderously. This is, of course, an unsubstantiated hunch. Who can know if the poisons that infect the befogged minds of America's insane are in kind different than those that infect the minds of Sweden's, or Burma's?

In reply, Schlesinger would say: "Look around you."

"We have become a frightening people—because for three years we have been wrecking a small country on the other side of the world in a war which bears no proportionate relationship to our national security or national interest."

It is the war, then, and violence on television, and the temptations of hyperbole in rhetoric that have fouled the Nation's serenity and measure. Yet Schlesinger is divided against himself on this point: he assails those who view the Vietnam misadventure as the inevitable fruits of our environment and system as people who indulge in "determinist nonsense."

(And of course it is impossible to speak of the murders of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Kennedys as "major techniques of domestic politics").

The author's section on



Force, Elegance'

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violence, with its grim statistics and homicide rates and accounts of televised mayhem, leaves us finally where we began: in grievous ignorance of the kinship between spur and act, between cause and effect. It makes such valuable reading because Schlesinger's apparent motive in writing his pieces was to make us understand ourselves as we really are. He proves, despite himself, that there are energies pos-

sessing us that are not accessible to reason, or the processes of logical deduction.

Reason is Schlesinger's most faithful ally. (Forgive him his occasional *ad hominem* attacks on Noam Chomsky and his perhaps too luxurious encomiums on the genius of the Kennedys). He argues for ideas against ideologies — the first are "relative," the latter, "absolute." He argues for "tough-minded" flexibility of response against "tender-minded" resistance to persuasion. He has a keen sense of the possible, as when he judges hopes for the decentralization of political power to be good in principle but unrealistic in fact. (There is a slim store of disinterested men in power, and most of them work in Washington, not in small towns.)

Yet for all the reasonable swing and balance of Schlesinger's language and arguments, there is in this work a distressing lack of something vital, something reassuring. The author is the last American we could ac-

cuse of being unassured, yet he is running very fast in these pieces, reaching very far for verifications of his conclusions.

His pages are peppered with quotes to support his arguments on behalf of hope and decency and renewal. (Three pages yield Pascal, Jefferson, Lincoln, Mussolini, Mailer, Nietzsche, Tom Hayden and Frantz Fanon). He indulges in interminable recapitulations of American history, as though somewhere in our past can be read the map of our future.

We may hope he is correct, that the tradition will hold, that the membrane of Western humanism will support our excesses. But as Schlesinger's study of American youth reveals, there is a possibility that the past has been irretrievably ruptured from the future.

Yeats said that rhetoric was the "will doing the work of the imagination." Schlesinger's rhetoric is the record of his will doing the work of our collective certainty.
